

DeGette urges Army recruiting inquiry

Soldiers cite threat of coercion: Re-enlist or go back to Iraq

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By Dick Foster ROCKY MOUNTAIN NEWS

Rep. Diana DeGette called upon Congress Monday to investigate complaints by Fort Carson soldiers that they are being threatened with deployment to Iraq if they do not re-enlist.

"I am hearing from enlisted personnel who are telling me they're being coerced into re-enlisting. They're telling me that if they don't re-enlist they're going to be sent back to Iraq," DeGette said, standing at the Colorado Veterans Memorial in front of the state Capitol Monday.

"This is an outrage. Soldiers who served honorably, fought in Iraq and are near the end of their service should not be threatened with impressment," she said.

The Denver Democrat sent a letter Monday to House Armed Services Committee Chairman Duncan Hunter, a California Republican, asking him to examine the soldiers' statements and Army practices.

Meanwhile, new accusations of coercion came from two more soldiers from Fort Carson's 3rd Brigade Combat Team. The soldiers told the Rocky Mountain News that Army recruiters told them to re-enlist for three years with the 3rd Brigade or they would be sent to other units most likely bound for Iraq.

Their accounts agreed with those of two soldiers who told the News two weeks ago that much of the 3rd Brigade was issued the same ultimatum in a series of meetings earlier this month.

A Fort Carson spokesman has said that 3rd Brigade recruitment officers denied threatening the soldiers with Iraq duty.

"We were offered about \$10,000 (as a bonus) to re-enlist, but a lot of us said no, we didn't want to," said Wes Swanson, a specialist who was wounded during his first tour in Iraq.

"So they said if you don't re-enlist, we're going to PCS (transfer) you to another unit that's going to Iraq, and you're going to end up going to Iraq for another year whether you re-enlist or not," he said.

Another soldier, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said he has less than a year left on active duty, but was told he'd be sent back to Iraq if he refused to re-enlist.

"I definitely would be involuntarily extended if they put me into a unit that was going back to Iraq," he said.

"Why not just let me finish what I signed up for? It's a shame a policy like this exists. We're supposed to be a volunteer Army," he said.

Army human resources officials responded to the soldiers' charges last week, saying that it is unlikely that those with less than 12 months of their obligation remaining would be sent to Iraq.

But the soldiers say that contradicts what the recruiters continue to tell them.

Extending a soldier's active duty is within Army authority. The enlistment contract carries an eight-year obligation, even if a soldier signs for only three or four years of active duty.

But the Army has rarely forced soldiers to stay beyond their active duty enlistment contracts, said one Vietnam-era veteran who accompanied DeGette Monday.

"I've never seen anything like this," said Ron Cole, a Navy pilot during the Vietnam war.

DeGette believes the Army is facing troop shortages and resorting to severe measures to retain soldiers.

"They're having problems meeting recruitment goals and they're putting this hammer over their heads, which is just wrong," said DeGette.

On Monday, The New York Times reported that the National Guard recruitment is expected to fall short of its annual recruiting quota for the first time since 1994, almost 10 percent below its goal of 56,000 recruits.

Swanson said that the active duty Army is "incredibly short of soldiers."

"The Army Times keeps saying there's not enough soldiers for this, there's not enough soldiers for that, and there's a lot of people who want to get out. I mean we're in the middle of a war, for God's sake," he said.

DeGette said she has heard anecdotally from Congress members that pressure is being exerted at other military posts.

"The question remains: How widespread is this? How deep does it go into the Pentagon? How far does it go up to the Oval Office?"

"We need to look into this and make sure we cherish and respect our fighting men and women," DeGette said.



DeGette says she's been hearing about soldiers "being coerced into re-enlisting."